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LIBRARY JOURNAL

SEPTEMBER 1, 1989

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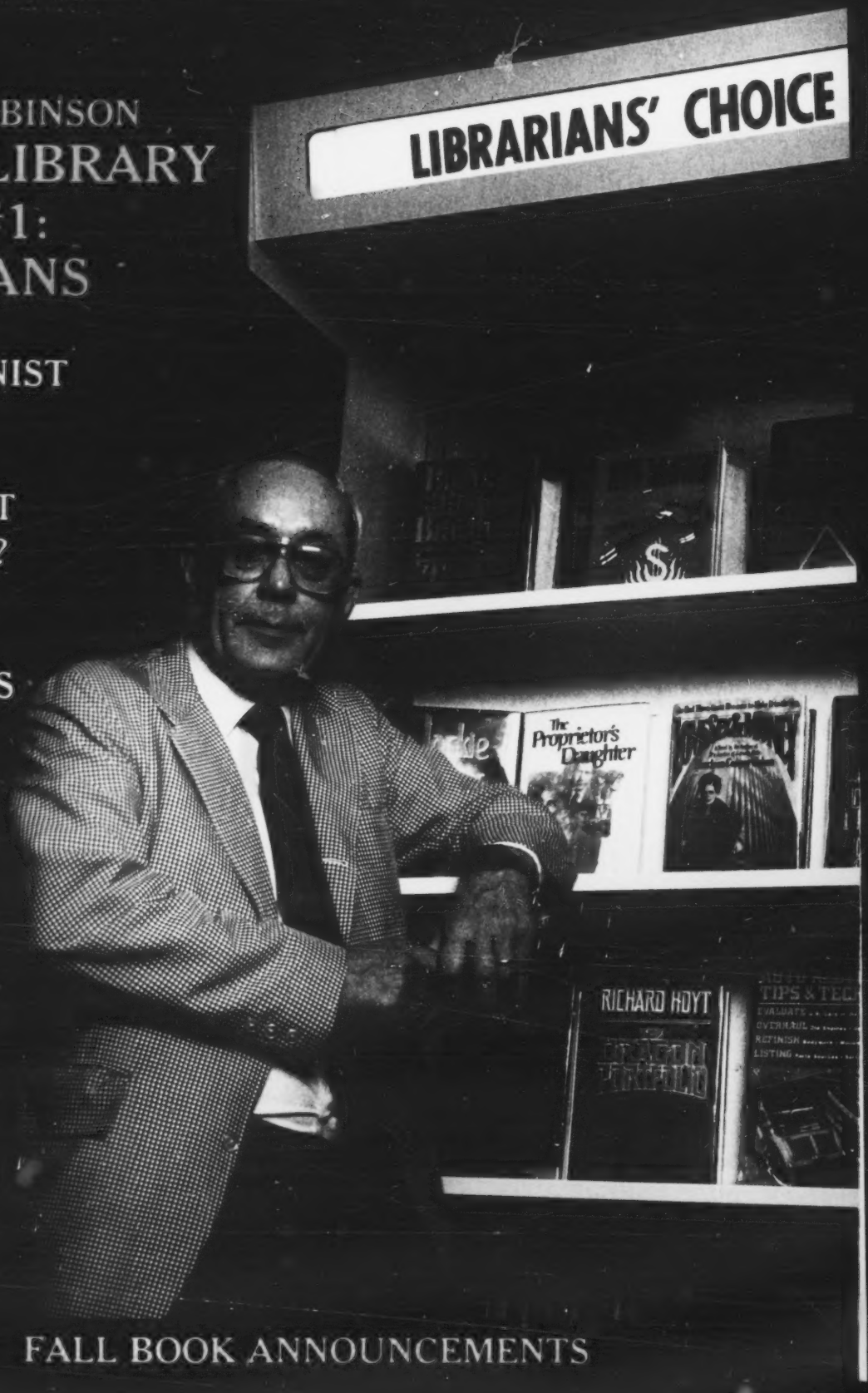

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Baltimore County's Charles Robinson believes he knows how to save public libraries from the inherent danger within. Read his article beginning on page 147 and see if you agree. Photograph by John Troha

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Editorial Offices: Library Journal, 249 W. 17th St., New York, NY 10011; 212-463-6819; FAX 212-242-6987.

Sales Offices: Library Journal, 249 W. 17th St., New York, NY 10011. Diane Carey, 212-463-6808; Nancy Iori, 212-463-6795; Karen Massimino, 212-463-6798; Lorena Parrish, 212-463-6799.

Midwest: Cahners Publishing, 1350 E. Touhy Ave., Des Plaines, IL 60018-3358. Ron Shank, 312-390-2927.

West: Library Journal, 7320 Hawthorn Ave., Suite 304, Los Angeles, CA 90046. Nancy Helmbold, 213-876-1375.

South: Library Journal, 2975 Christophers Ct. NE, Marietta, GA 30062. Robin Mays, 404-977-9372.

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LIBRARY MARKET OUTLOOK

BY KIM KENNEDY

Reading Still a Top Leisure Time Activity

Leisure time is a valuable commodity because of its scarcity. Most Americans, in fact, *think* that they have very little free time—far less today than they thought 15 years ago. According to a recent Louis Harris poll, Americans report that they currently have just 16.2 hours of leisure time per week, down from 26.2 hours in 1973.

However, a representative sample of Americans aged 18–64 kept a one-day diary of all their activities for the Americans Use of Time Project, and it reveals a very different picture of leisure time. According to these diaries, men have 40 hours per week of free time, and women have 39. For men, the amount of free time on their hands has not changed from 1965, while women's free time has actually increased by five hours. Since 1975, men's leisure time has increased by two hours—the amount by which it declined between 1965 and 1975—while women's has grown by one hour.

When I was single

The amount of free time a person has actually varies considerably depending upon the age, marital status, and the presence or absence of children. Persons aged 18–35 and those aged 51–64 have more free time than persons aged 35–50, who are in the midst of their family and work lives. Unmarried people have more free time than married ones, and childless people have more free time than those with children. The differences among these groups have widened over time.

Single women, for example, have 11 more hours of free time now than in 1965, while married women have just two additional hours of free time. Single women now have 43 hours per week, compared to 37 hours for married women. The difference is even more pronounced for those with and without children. Childless women typically have 41 hours of free time during the week, compared to just 34 hours for women with children under the age of five. While the amount of leisure time has increased by six hours for childless women, women with children under age five have seen no increase in their free time since 1965.

Regardless of the *amount* of free time people have, reading continues to be an important way to fill it. Today, 14 percent of Americans are avid book readers, compared to just ten percent in 1960 (when television reigned supreme). The Harris poll and the American Use of Time Project provide further indicators that Americans are reading more, as indicated by the Gallup poll reported in "American Reading Habits (and Education) on the Rise," in Library Market Outlook (*LJ*, May 15, p. 22).

How they spend it

Although the most popular leisure time activity is watching television, reading a newspaper comes in a close second, with 70 percent of people doing it almost every day, and 98 percent reading a newspaper at least once a month. Two-thirds of the American public read a book for pleasure at least once a month (24 percent do so every day, and 22 percent about once or twice per week). Another 85 percent read a magazine at least once a month, 18 percent every day, and 39 percent at least once or twice a week.

It is also clear that many people turn to their libraries for a lot of this reading. Many earlier studies showed that library book borrowers are more likely than other citizens to be book buyers as well. In the annual study of library circulation conducted by the University of Illinois Library Research Center, library book circulation had increased to 5.7 books per capita in 1988, up from 4.7 in 1980. In other words, Americans borrowed 21 percent more books in 1988 than they did in 1980.

Less leisure means more reading

Interestingly, those with the least amount of leisure time (those 35–50 years old) are those most likely to buy and read books, according to the annual Gallup report on book buying and reading habits. Persons aged 35–49 are 26 percent of the population, but buy 31 percent of the books. They are also more likely to be "heavy" buyers of books (five or more books over a three-month period). Nearly a third of 35- to 49-year-olds are heavy buyers of books.

As increasing numbers of baby boomers move into this age group, the book industry should have a boom of its own. From 1988 to 2000, the population aged 35–49 will grow by nearly a third (32 percent) to reach 63.8 million. At this rate, there will be 4.9 million more heavy book users in the year 2000. If each of these people purchase five books over a three-month period, an additional 99 million books will be sold during the year to heavy book buyers.

Since it is known that library book circulation parallels book buying, the book buying boom should indicate a similar boom in library circulation.

Percent of Americans Who Read

	Newspapers	Books	Magazines
At Least Once a Month	90	67	85
Every Day	70	24	18
1-2 Times/Week	17	22	39
1-2 Times/Month	3	21	28

Kim Kennedy is an economist with Cahners Economics, which provides industry analyses and forecasting services for the markets its magazines serve

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LIBRARY JOURNAL is published by Bowker Magazine Group, The Cahners Publishing Co., a Division of Reed Publishing USA, 275 Washington St., Newton MA 02158-1630. Terrence M. McDermott, President; Robert T. Brawn, Sr. Vice President/General Manager; Jerry D. Neth, Sr. Vice President/Publishing Operations; J. J. Walsh, Sr. Vice President/Finance; Thomas J. Dellamaria, Sr. Vice President/Production & Manufacturing; Ralph Knupp, Vice President/Human Resources. Bowker Magazine Group is also an affiliate of R. R. Bowker Co., Gordon Graham, Chairman of the Board; Ira Siegel, President. Copyright © 1989 by Reed Publishing, USA; Ronald G. Segel, Chairman and CEO; Robert L. Krakoff, President and COO; William M. Platt, Sr. Vice President. Direct editorial and advertising correspondence to 249 West 17th Street, New York, NY 10011. Telephone: 212-463-6819. Subscription inquiries and changes of address should be directed to Library Journal, PO Box 1977, Marion, OH 43305-1977. Telephone: 1-800-669-1002 (in continental U.S. only). In Alaska, Hawaii, Canada and all other countries, telephone: 614-382-3322. Issued 20 times a year, twice a month, February through June and September through November, and once a month in January, July, August, and December. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. Cahners Publishing Company, A Division of Reed Publishing USA ☐ Specialized Business Magazines for Building & Construction, Manufacturing, Foodservice & Lodging, Electronics & Computers, Interior Design, Printing, Publishing, Industrial Research & Technology, Health Care, and Entertainment. ☐ Specialized Consumer Magazines: *American Baby and Modern Bride*. LIBRARY JOURNAL IS INDEXED IN *Educational Index, Library Literature, Library & Information Science Abstracts*, and *Magazine Index*. Subscriptions: USA: 1 year $69; 2 years, $117; 3 years, $165. Canada: 1 year $94, 2 years $160, 3 years $225. All other countries (surface delivery): 1 year $100. All other countries (air delivery): 1 year $125, 2 years $212, 3 years $300. (Remit in US funds only.) Single copy, $5.00. Spring & Fall Announcement Issues, $6.95. ISSN 0363-0277. Postmaster: Please send address changes to Library Journal, P.O. Box 1977, Marion, OH 43305-1977.